LIFE OF THE MIND

The next decider

The election isn't just a referendum on ideology. It's a contest between two modes of thinking.

By Jonah Lehrer | October 5, 2008

FOR THE LAST eight years, America has had a president with an audacious approach to making decisions. "I'm a gut player. I rely on my instincts," President Bush has said repeatedly. It doesn't matter if he's making a decision about invading Iraq, the intentions of a foreign leader, or pushing ahead with Social Security reform: Bush believes in the power of his intuition.

Critics have lampooned this aspect of the Bush presidency. Comedian Stephen Colbert regularly mocks the approach with his invocations of "truthiness," or facts that are only true according to the gut instinct of the president; Washington Post journalist Bob Woodward writes in his most recent book that "Bush's instincts are almost his second religion." While Bush's supporters see him as unwavering and resolute, these critics describe a president who is reckless and impulsive, willing to ignore any information that contradicts what he's feeling.

The irony is that the eight years of the Bush administration have coincided with a growing body of scientific research demonstrating the power of human instincts, at least in certain circumstances. In fact, some studies suggest that when confronted with a complex decision - and the decisions of the president are as complex as it gets - people often do best when they rely on their gut feelings, just as Bush does.

However, it has also become clear that listening to your instincts is just a part of making good decisions. The crucial skill, scientists are now saying, is the ability to think about your own thinking, or metacognition, as it is known. Unless people vigilantly reflect on how they are making an important decision, they won't be able to properly use their instincts, or know when their gut should be ignored. Indeed, according to this emerging new vision of decision-making, the best predictor of good judgment isn't intuition or experience or intelligence. Rather, it's the willingness to engage in introspection, to cultivate what Philip Tetlock, a psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, calls "the art of self-overhearing."

This new research is especially relevant during the 2008 presidential election, as Barack Obama and John McCain appear to have starkly different approaches to decision-making.

McCain has been working diligently to distance himself from Bush, but he proudly places himself in the president's decision-making camp. "I don't torture myself over decisions. I make them as quickly as I can, quicker than the other fellow, if I can," he wrote in his 2002 book, "Worth the Fighting For." "Often my haste is a mistake, but I live with the consequences without complaint." In recent weeks, many political commentators have blamed McCain's instinctive decisions for costly political miscalculations, such as his decision to briefly "suspend" his campaign.

Obama's advisers describe a candidate who strives to make choices that are methodical, deliberate, and depend on a wide variety of information. As former congressman and current federal judge Abner Mikva says, "In all the years I've known him, I've never seen him emotionally angry. . . . The emotions never went into the decisional process." This has led some pundits to brand Obama as aloof and detached, unable to relate to the feelings and frustrations of ordinary Americans.

The election, then, isn't merely a contest between two political ideologies. The two candidates also represent distinct cognitive styles, turning Nov. 4 into a referendum on the best mode of thinking. In recent decades, this same story has tended to recapitulate itself along party lines, with Republican candidates, such as Reagan and Bush, endorsing a "going with the gut" approach and Democrats, such as Carter, Kerry, and Obama, attempting to demonstrate a more cerebral style.

The emerging consensus among scientists, however, is that both approaches are inherently flawed. While our instincts and emotions can be astonishingly prescient, they can also lead us to disaster. And a more deliberative style brings its own set of problems, such as losing sight of the most relevant information and even a debilitating indecisiveness.
While the candidates bicker about the best way to make a decision - McCain has attempted to brand Obama as an effete elitist, while Obama has stressed the riskiness of McCain's approach - both men agree that being a successful president requires prudent judgment. When you're leader of the free world, the buck stops at the Oval Office.

And so, in a sense, the election comes down to this question: When the White House phone rings at 3 a.m., what kind of decider do you want to take the call?

One of the first insights into the importance of gut instinct in decision-making came from Antonio Damasio, a neuroscientist at the University of Southern California. In the early 1990s, Damasio began publishing a series of landmark papers describing the symptoms of patients who, after a brain injury, were unable to perceive or experience emotion. At the time, most scientists assumed that such a deficit would lead to more rational decisions, since the patients were free of their irrational instincts.

Damasio found the opposite: these dispassionate patients made consistently bad decisions. Some made terrible investments and ended up bankrupt; others started drinking heavily and getting into fights; most just spent hours deliberating over irrelevant details, such as where to eat lunch. According to Damasio, when people are cut off from their emotions even the most banal decisions become all but impossible.

Subsequent research, much of it taking place in the last few years, has helped explain why emotions are such an essential part of the decision-making process. Ap Dijksterhuis, a psychologist at Radboud University in the Netherlands, has demonstrated that when people are given choices with many variables - he often makes people choose between different cars and apartments - they tend to make the best decision when relying on their unconscious, which generates our inarticulate instincts. In contrast, people who consciously deliberate over which car to buy tend to fixate on extraneous facts, leading them to bad choices.

According to Dijksterhuis, the moral of this research is that people making complex decisions should analyze their options, but then stop: "go on holiday while your unconscious digests the problem," he writes. "Whatever your intuition then tells you is almost certainly going to be the best choice."

While this research has led to a new appreciation for the powers of the unconscious - it's no longer seen as a fraught, Freudian underworld - this brain system isn't perfect. Richard Thaler, a behavioral economist at the University of Chicago, has spent the last few decades identifying a number of these unconscious cognitive hiccups, isolating the "heuristics and biases" that cause people to do everything from overbid on eBay to not invest in their 401(k). These flaws are rooted in a part of the mind that people can't control - the unconscious is often referred to as the "automatic system" - so intelligence is no antidote. "This is why it's such a bad idea to let the automatic system take over," Thaler says.

Scientists are only beginning to figure out the kind of situations that are best suited for each mode of decision-making. There's some preliminary evidence, however, that simple problems - those involving a limited number of variables - are best suited for deliberate thought, so that people don't make any obvious mistakes. In contrast, complex problems seem to benefit from the processing powers of the unconscious, as long as people first take the time to carefully, deliberately assimilate all the relevant facts.

Given the distinct talents of these different types of thought - the brain is like a Swiss army knife, stuffed full of tools - scientists argue that it's imperative for powerful decision-makers to constantly reflect on their own thought process. The best decisions occur when people take the time to study their decision-making process, and not just the decision itself. In other words, don't simply focus on the alternatives - reflect on how those alternatives are being considered. The end result is decisions that are more likely to be made in the right frame of mind.

One of the best ways for a president to maintain control of the decision-making process is to surround himself with advisers willing to criticize his decisions. "Psychologists spend a lot of time focusing on individual abilities," says Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at the University of Virginia. "But what's even more important is the type of environment that's set up around a president. A leader who encourages a diversity of viewpoints" - and Haidt argues that presidents should fill the cabinet with advisers from both parties - "is going to make much more effective decisions."

That's also the moral of "Team of Rivals," the best-selling history of the Lincoln presidency by Doris Kearns Goodwin. She argues that it was Lincoln's ability to deal with conflicting points of view - he filled his cabinet with rival politicians with different ideologies - that made him such a remarkable president and leader. Before making a decision, Lincoln insisted on vigorous debate and discussion. Although several members of the cabinet initially
assumed that Lincoln was weak-willed and indecisive, they eventually realized that his ability to tolerate dissent was an enormous asset. As Secretary of State William Seward said, "The president is the best of us."

Unfortunately, some scientists worry that the act of running for president discourages politicians from developing these metacognitive skills. On the campaign trail, a confession of doubt or admission of error is often instant fodder for an attack ad; equivocation has become a faux pas. As a result, politicians tend to lapse into the easy language of certainty.

"If I were a campaign adviser, of course I'd be sure to tell my candidate to always look sure of himself," says Tetlock. "But that same pose can actually be counterproductive. We should see self-awareness and even self-doubt as a sign of strength, not as a sign of weakness."

The ideal president, then, won't conform to the current cliches of presidential decision-making. He'll exude confidence in public, but behind the scenes he'll accept his fallibility and seek out those who disagree with him. He won't fixate on rational deliberation - or worship the power of his intuition. The brain is not a hammer, and not every problem is a nail.

J

hon Lehrer is an editor at large at Seed magazine and the author of "Proust Was a Neuroscientist." His next book, "How We Decide," will be published in February. He is a regular contributor to Ideas.